

Interview with Gaby Goldman, Communication Director at the Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish-Arab Education, Israel

Hand in Hand-Centre for Jewish-Arab Education's mission is to create a strong, inclusive, shared society in Israel through a network of Jewish-Arab integrated bilingual schools and organized communities. It currently operates integrated schools and communities in six locations with 1,578 Jewish and Arab students and more than 8,000 community members. Over the next ten years, it aims to create a network of 10-15 schools, supported and enhanced by community activities, altogether involving more than 20,000 Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens. Jews and Arabs - learning together, living together - and inspiring broad support for social inclusion and civic equality in Israel. (From Hand in Hand-Centre for Jewish Arab education website <http://www.handinhandk12.org/>)



Figure 1 The Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish Arab Education in Jerusalem

ReFAL: Could you please tell us about how Hand in Hand-Centre for Jewish Arab Education came to be in 1998, what were its premises and objectives?

G.G._ The project started almost 20 years ago, and this year we are going to celebrate its 20th anniversary. It came to life from the idea and vision of two men: Amin Khalaf and Lee Gordon, one Arab and one Jewish. The Israeli education system works in this way: it is divided into 4 different tracks. There is State secular education; State religious education; State ultra-religious education; and State Arab education. They are separated. Israeli Jews do not meet Israeli Arabs in their daily lives: they do not even go to the same school. They do not have the chance to learn that there are children on the other side. How can this make sense, in areas like Haifa, like Jaffa, like the Galilee, where Jewish and Arabs virtually share the same space?

ReFAL_What led you to invest in a project focused on education?

G.G. _This choice was due to either ideological either practical reasons: the practical reason is that there is nothing as daily as education. Every day you get to spend hours and hours with your classmates, who come from different backgrounds, different families, have different stories and different narratives of the same events. And it is a daily choice that you make, that the parents make: they choose every day to take their children to this school, despite the fact that they might not agree with the parents of their children's classmates. But it is a daily choice and a daily engagement that they make for their children's future.

As for the second reason, it resonates within the very notion of *education*. When you introduce kids, starting from a very young age, to the "other", to its language and culture, it becomes natural for them to grow up taking this other reality into account. Our students are perfectly bilingual: Hebrew and Arabic coexist in the school all the time. Both are the languages of their daily lives, spoken by their kinder-garden teachers, by their friends, the languages in which they play. So when they grow up, they will not react in fear of the unknown when hearing Hebrew or Arabic, because they will understand that language. They'd understand from a very young age that on the other side there are people as well. It would cease to be only the language of fear, or TV news: it will be also the language of their friends. This of course does not mean that there are no disputes, or disagreements within the school. Especially when students grow up and learn about the context of the conflict: but thanks to this common ground, they get to learn how to talk their disputes through. They do not need to agree: the important thing is not for them to come out of class knowing at 100% who is wrong and who is right, but rather to know that the school is a place where they can meet and discuss about everything. The first thing they learn at school, is that sometime they have to agree that they can't all agree on certain topics: that multiple narratives can exist side by side, that their classmates will listen to them, and they will all be treated equally. And despite their disagreements, they choose every day to go back to the school, and therefore to be together.

Also, community is important. One of the founders used to tell this story about the night he presented the project in the Galilee: it was a very dark and rainy night, the peak of winter season. He was sure that no one was ever going to show up. Instead, half hour later, there were dozens of people waiting for him, and the room was so packed there was not enough space for people willing to enter. The first two classrooms were in Jerusalem and the Galilee. They didn't even start as schools, they were just classrooms, and in Jerusalem for example the classroom was hosted by another school. They were strongly supported by a group of people, of parents really convinced that their children should be educated together. I give you an example: the parent of one of the first graders of 20 years ago, named Nadia Kinanni, today is the director of the Jerusalem school. She was a teacher for many years and then she became director: her three daughters are studying in there as well.

Now, almost 20 years later, the Jerusalem school goes from kinder-garden, so from the age of three, to high school, so to the age of 18. The Galilee school is still active and arrives until primary school, and over the years we managed to open 4 new schools in different part of the country, all thanks to the strong efforts and supports of groups of families living in those areas. There are now schools in Tel-Aviv Jaffa, in Wadi Ara, in Haifa and in Tira & Kfar Saba. They all started as kinder-gardens and grew up together with their students, so until now from kinder-garden to primary school.



Figure 2A class in the Hand in Hand Center for Jewish Arab education

ReFAL_ We know that the school is not isolated from the outside: students will come to schools having read news or wishing to discuss about certain topics. How do the teachers manage to deal with that?

G.G. Reality comes in through the door every morning. The school can't be isolated and does not wish to be isolated: the first thing is not to ignore it. We do not try to shelter the kids from reality or hide it from them. Of course, this takes a lot of efforts for the teachers and for the all system. If there is a specific issue that comes up with current affairs or in the news, that the teachers want to discuss because they know they kids would want to refer to, first they have to process it themselves. And not only with themselves, but with their co-teacher as well. Since each class as two teachers, one Arab and one Jewish, they first need to understand how they are interpreting the news before entering to class. They do not have to agree on their interpretation, because at the end, this is the whole point: by looking at them presenting different opinions, students can learn that it is possible not to have one single-sided story. Of course the whole system needs constant supervision and support to the teachers in order for them to cope with this: it is not an easy task for them. Also, they need to teach together: no teacher is born with this ability. The natural trend is to teach in your own way in front of the class. So there is a lot of supervision and a lot of efforts from their side as well to learn how to teach together. We have pedagogical trainers coming even three or four times a week to work with them, examining what's coming up in the last classes and how to prepare for the next ones. There is an all system going one behind the scenes that students are not aware of.

ReFAL_Your curriculum has many added values: it is in two languages, it involves two teachers per class, sometimes even three, depending on the nature of the lesson. Furthermore, you have to take into account trainings and extra-curricular activities. Where do you find the budget to afford the costs and maintain your standards?

G.G._ We are a state public school. This means that we are not private, but we receive funding by the Israeli Ministry of Education, like all others public schools, based on the size of each schools and the number of

students. But apart from that, we have other two lines that come into the budget. One is parents' fees: not as high as in private schools of course, but around 100 dollars per year. And the third pillar is philanthropy, which is the most important source of income for us. We have two teachers per class, which leads to almost double the budget. Then, we have the training sessions, the dedicated activities, plus the sessions dedicated to the study of festivities and religions of the three big religions represented in the school. This means that in those occasions we will have to train and pay three teachers: one Jewish, one Muslim, and one Christian. And in order to keep up with this curriculum, we need to increase the support that comes from philanthropy and private donations. All this needs to be affordable: and not only affordable, because we need to make sure that no kid willing to attend our school would be restrained from doing so for lack of economic means. We need to maintain a rich system of scholarships for those students, and for that, we need as many philanthropic donations as we can.

ReFAL_What were the first challenges the school experienced at the time of its opening?

G.G_ The first challenge was convincing parents that this was something needed. It was perceived so natural for Jews and Arabs to study apart that it actually took a lot of efforts convincing that it was just not natural at all. Along the years, challenges rather came from the local municipalities, which were not always willing to support to support such a project. Not in terms of strong ideological opposition, but because it requires a lot of attention and efforts. But the funny thing is that even the biggest opponents, over the years became our best supporters: to give you just one example, the mayor of Haifa. At first, the municipality did not see the need for a bilingual school in the city: but after a very big effort from the local community, we were able to open the school. And what is curious, is that the mayor of Haifa attended the very first day of the school in September, took picture with our first graders turned into the cover photo of his Facebook wall. It is a great achievement. Now it is not an obstacle anymore to convince parents about the project: the demand is way higher than what we can offer. And what may perhaps seem counterintuitive, but it happens, is that the harder the times get, the violence hits our communities, the more we see people coming to us, insisting on taking a stand.



Figure 3 Picture from the Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem

ReFAL_Back in 2014, the Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem suffered a terrible arson from unknown offenders, who set on fire the school's first graders' class and damaged the walls of the schools with offensive graffiti. What was the reaction of the directors of the school and of the families and students involved?

G.G. _The arson occurred exactly 3 years and 2 weeks ago on the Saturday night of November 30th 2014. The first thought from the director of the school, was that that would be the end of the project: no one would have sent their children to a school someone just tried to burn down. Except that in few hours more than 200 people came to help, and the day after no one among the students missed school. They were all there. Plus, delegation from other schools in Jerusalem and from other parts of the country came to show their support, and many people, even those who did not have children at the school, came to show their solidarity, while the high school students helped cleaning up the first graders classes and cancelled the graffiti. We understood those two days that our school had behind it a very strong community, whose help and support was priceless. Each school now has around a very active community that we try to nurture. The logic behind it is that is not just to put all the pressure of living together only on the shoulders of the kids. It's not that parents can be satisfied by just enrolling their kids at the school: in order to fully participate to the process, parents and grown-ups should take responsibility as well. They have to get to know parents from other side, the same way their kids are doing. It is difficult, and it starts from very small activities to arrive to bigger activities and shared field trips: because of that, there are trainers accompanying them in this task to help them.

ReFAL_If you need to name a couple of achievements, what would they be?

G.G. _Well, the first is evident, and it is the growing numbers of students. Between 8 and 10 thousand if we count the families and supporters, while the impact goes way beyond. The second achievement is the stability of our idea. The schools can go through very difficult times depending on what happens in society: but we are now stable and strong enough to overcome them together. It is not a Disney movie: you may have days, when reality comes into the classroom: imagine a situation like the one of the last war in Gaza. In such a context you may have a student, whose cousin is Gaza, his family is being bombed by the cousin of the child sitting right next to him in class. It's hard, it's challenging, and we are not providing a miracle solution: but we are trying to deal with it in the best way we can.

A third achievement, connected to the second one which is the most important, is going into the Israeli mainstream in terms of public image and the perception that the public has of us. If 20 years ago this project was perceived as strange, and even preposterous and ridiculous, today things have changed. Mindset has changed: there are of course people who still oppose our idea, or people that would not send their children to our schools, but know our offer is a considered a valid alternative. People know that it is there, and they considered it an alternative as valid as many others. This is already a huge turning point. Another impact is the fact that more and more people are coming to us saying that they want to set up a new school and a new community. It comes from them, and not from us: and the means that our way of looking at things is reaching more and more people and that is perceived and feasible and reachable.

ReFAL_Is your teaching model replicable?

G.G. _Absolutely. We are not the only bilingual model in the world. And there may be different ways of teaching. But the very idea of putting emphasis on equality of the languages and composition of the staff in the curriculum, and of learning both context and both cultures, should be replicated.

ReFAL_Do you have any advice or good practices you feel like sharing with organizations dealing with similar projects?

G.G._ There are three basic principles that we try to follow: the first is transparency. You need to talk about everything. Hiding things from the students will not be beneficial for them. We don't pretend we have the perfect solution or that such thing even exists. We have difficulties, and sometimes is really hard. But never pretend that there are no difficulties or challenges, be open about it. We are bond to argue, to fight, and to disagree, that's ok: but the important thing is keeping asking ourselves what we can do with that.

The second pillar, or advice, is to nurture your community: even if the core of what we do is at the school, it could not go that far without the heart and soul of the community of people gathered together behind our idea. You can't put a price to that. It pushes us to work toward the future.

The third principle is equality: obviously we live in the context that we live, where equality is often not included. It is not easy, but we strive for it: whether we succeed or not is an issue, but it is an issue we can always come back to: if we see things are not working as we wanted them to, we think again on how to improve our method and we go on. We have in mind that we want to be equal, and this is the goal that keep us going.



Figure 4 Picture from the Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem